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ABSTRACT

Ethnic minorities are underserved in adult education in the United States. Reasons for the lack of a national education initiative actively promoting education equity for ethnic minorities include the low status of adult education, discrimination, and lack of financial support. Programs of English as a Second Language are examples of good programs that prepare students for employment. However, after program completion, no one supplies cultural nurture to encourage the student to continue with education. Good multicultural programs are operating in the United States, but examples show the ephemeral nature of many programs. The first challenge is to realize that the melting pot concept must be replaced by a concept of cultural pluralism based on the idea that persons from many cultures can live together without forfeiting their cultural heritage. Much cross-cultural education is necessary for the adults in the dominant group to develop this realization. A second challenge is to develop a national policy to provide necessary, relevant, and accessible educational opportunities to minority adults to empower them to make educational decisions based on equity. The third challenge is the question of financing in a time of economic crisis. A fourth challenge is for adult education researchers and writers to exert their efforts in this direction. (YLB)

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MULTICULTURALISM: THE CHALLENGE TO ADULT EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

(Prepared for the Executive Committee Meeting of the International Council for Adult Education in Gothenborg, Sweden, April 4-11, 1991)

by

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What is the purpose of adult education? Can it be anything other than enhancing the quality of life for the individual for his or her own sake and for the sake of the community, the nation and the world? I believe this is the vision we all share, even if it may sound a little overwhelming to state it as I have done.

However, it is of crucial importance that we keep the larger vision before us as we each work in our own place and time, and with our own particular goals and clientele. This is important for several reasons. In the first place we are energized by seeing the picture whole and by the knowledge of the work being accomplished by our colleagues all over the world. In the second place, I believe that we serve our students better, if we see them, and they see themselves, as players on the world stage, which they truly are. For we should be building curricula that teaches them international and multicultural understanding right along with literacy, English as a Second Language, or any other specialty all across the learning spectrum including continuing professional education.

We all understand that a wide variety of specialized purposes and goals for adult education feed the overall vision mentioned above. I have just suggested several of them, and we could list many more, such as, religious education, women's education, corrections education, workers' education, higher education, human resource development and on and on. Each specialty has its own mission, goals and objectives which indeed do feed the larger vision. There is one consideration, however, which has received short shrift and is only coming into focus in our time. That is the issue of multiculturalism.

Sometimes, in naming our programs, we refer to a special population, such as, single parents; or we refer to institutional structures, such as, the community college, but in any case, as adult educators we do try to be very conscious of the fact that we are working with individuals, who may be very different from each other in experience, education, social and economic background, motivation, ability, etc. There is, however, one population which cuts across many of the specialized adult education concentrations, which needs more attention and understanding than we have given to this point. These persons are the unserved ethnic minorities in the United States.

We must face the fact that the numbers of ethnic minority persons are growing exponentially, so that not so far into the next century they will compose one-third of our population.

One might immediately answer that minority populations are served in all kinds of adult education situations. That is true, but very often we do it incidentally. Minorities are, of course, welcomed to these programs if they know about them, if they feel welcome to them, if they can afford them, if they feel they will be comfortable in them, if they feel these programs can really make a difference to their well-being, if there is day care for their children, if anyone speaks their language, and if they know how to use the system well enough to get themselves registered.

One might immediately answer to this that there are also very special programs for ethnic minorities which address many of the barriers mentioned above. Again I say that also is true. However, it is my experience that these programs are initiated by particularly motivated and committed adult educators, who often

carry out these programs with special grants. They pour their time and energies into their work way beyond the call of duty but they often find out there is not enough financial and social commitment in their communities or systems to help them carry on over time. The grants, or other funding, come to an end and the educator suffers from burn-out. The minority adults who have happened to find themselves in these programs and have benefited from them are the lucky ones. There are still vast numbers of minority adults in need of adult education services who remain unserved.

Above I have mentioned numerous barriers which prohibit the individual from taking advantage of even those services that are available. But what are the reasons why we do not have a national educational initiative actively promoting educational equity for our ethnic minorities? Granting that there are many local initiatives, we have to say they do not add up to a national policy.

The reasons are not hard to find. If adult education itself carries low status in the educational world, then the movement does not carry sufficient power to affect national policy. As for minorities, the word itself speaks to the possibility of discrimination, which leaves their needs often as invisible. Even in good times, adult education does not get enough financial support, so in times of crisis, it is among the first programs cut, and new monies for minorities are hard to come by. Changing administrations cancel previous efforts in order to direct monies elsewhere. Anyway, it could be assumed that

minority persons should make use of whatever programs are available. We have had a false "melting pot" mentality, presuming that all will be the same and, therefore, it is up to each as to whether he/she sinks or swims.

I must reiterate here that I am well aware of many good programs at various levels for minority adults. I think first of some the the English as Second Language (ESL) programs. They are to be found in most cities and some communities in our country. Also I hasten to point out that sometimes I think the ESL teachers are some of our best adult educators. With multiple languages and cultures represented in their classrooms, they must be dedicated, creative and committed to helping each individual progress. They do succeed. They bring their students to the point where they can get employment--no small success. But when the student reaches that point and leaves the program, who is supplying the cultural nurture to keep him/her on track to carry on with their education? We have to do more than educate persons to the level where they can buy a loaf of bread if they are to be the inheritors and the stewards of our democracy.

Let me mention a few illustrative cases to bring some of these points out more clearly. At the present time, I am enrolled in an Interactive Television Course (ITV) on "The Principles of Multicultural Education" which originates in the University of Maine at Augusta and is beamed all over the state so that graduate students may take it in their local high schools or other educational facilities. The students see the professor, although he cannot see them, and the students and the professor can all hear each other in discussion periods by telephone--a

really fine educational opportunity for students in such a large rural state. Although this course is concentrating on Kindergarten through grade 12, it gives me a wonderful opportunity to become acquainted with the various cultures in the state to which I have just moved. All this introduction is leading up to one point that continually strikes me. No matter who is speaking, whether the professor, a guest speaker or the other students, there is always the concern for the culturally different student that the parents of the child are not in a position to be supportive because either they do not speak English at home, or do not understand the American values and practices related to the public school, or are uneducated themselves. To me this says there is a need for adult education in order to break the cycle of failure, and not only with recent immigrants but for Blacks, Native Americans and Hispanics who have been with us forever.

In my own community work, I have taken graduate students to work in a very special way with Black women in low-income housing projects --not to tell them what they should do, but to be mutually respected friends, to learn from them how they cope and keep a family going, what their values are, what their needs are and what kind of help they would like to have. This is a very significant experience for adult education graduate students. This participatory process is also very significant for the women themselves as they gradually accept the fact that there may be a bit of hope for them that they can start to turn their lives around. Over a number of years, we have helped women to achieve their high school equivalency and, for a few, to enter the city

college. The exciting and important point about all this is that when the women start to take their own education seriously, the children do, too. Then you see mothers and children competing to see who can get the best grades. The children stop dropping out of school and they want to go on to enter the city college, too.

I firmly believe that the education of parents is the most effective way to enhance the education of children. However, I was one of those adult educators who had to carry out this project with my own initiative, energy and sometimes money, and no one at the university really saw it as an important project. I am pleased to say that when I retired, a committed former student took over the project personally, got a group of low-income women together, got them incorporated with their own executive board, and was successful in finding some funding to keep the project going. I consider that one of the outstanding successes of my career. Still we are talking about very small numbers--maybe a dozen women at one time. Other special projects in other places may be smaller or larger, but still thousands of such women are not served in any way educationally significant way.

Looking to the reason why these women were lost outside the social safety net, we have to realize that they are mostly on welfare and while they do have a social worker who calls on them regularly, it is often a repressive situation. Some social workers are better than others, of course, but they all carry dozens of cases and their job is not to be adult educators, even though they might refer persons to programs. The parent who is hopeless that he or she will ever enter the mainstream,

whether recent immigrant or ethnics of long-standing, need very special help and it all begins with respect for the individual person--a quality that gets lost in bureaucratic programs.

Let's look at another situation. A professor in a community college in California where the majority population is Hispanic, wondered why only less than 25 percent of the students at the college were Hispanic. He decided to go into the community and have meetings with the people wherever they met for other reasons. He held consciousness-raising sessions for the people to help them raise their self-esteem. He even got permission from the college to hold some of his introductory courses in community gathering places. When the people began to believe that education could help them, and they had the self-esteem to go after it, and the self-assurance that they could handle the system, they began to enroll and then the community college could serve the purpose for which it had been created. One man who had been gardening for the college for many years, said he had never realized that the college was there for him.

One more example illustrates another of the needs of immigrant adults. An instructor in the nursing program at the University of Illinois in Chicago was disturbed that women in the Korean community there were really not benefiting from the efforts of the University's community work. She made an assumption that a conflict of values and priorities existed between the medical workers and the Korean women. In short, she and some of her colleagues carried out a participatory research and training project whereby the community women helped the

medical workers to understand the basic needs and values of the Korean women, while the medical workers showed the women how to use the system--political, social and medical--to satisfy their needs in the longer run. These needs related to the causes of their medical problems--wife beating, teen pregnancy, alcoholism. In the World Health Organization, these needs are known as "primary health care." The woman who initiated this project, however, received a grant to work in Botswana, and one can wonder if this program is continuing.

However, there was another fine multicultural program in Chicago that is not continuing. The University of Northern Illinois had a very non-traditional graduate center in Chicago, where multicultural persons were graduate students, where they carried out many kinds of training programs for teachers in multicultural schools, where the research centered around multicultural educational problems and much more. However, the program was financed by a grant from the state. After a number of years, a new administration wanted that money for another purpose and the program was terminated.

There is no question that anyone interested in making a search can find very good multicultural programs operating in many places in the United States, but the illustrations above do show the possible emphemeral nature of many programs. Now let us look at the challenges and how we could address them.

The first challenge is the notion held by members of the dominant culture that minorities are a sort of aberrant social problem and that they will eventually "melt" into the culture and everything will be OK. And this is sort of what happened with

the early waves of immigrants from Europe. This was possible because their appearance was the same as those who had arrived earlier to settle the country. Especially the second generation was eager to be more American than the Americans. The situation has always been different for the Blacks, and now with a new appreciation of cultural differences, many groups do not want to abandon their ethnic heritages, whether Black, Hispanic, Native American or Asian.

Therefore, the basic challenge for the United States is to realize that the melting pot concept must be replaced by a concept of cultural pluralism which is based on the idea that persons from many cultures can live together in the American democracy without forfeiting precious cultural heritages, and that this, in fact, will enrich the whole of society. However, it will take much cross-cultural education for the adults in the dominant group to develop this realization. One particular way cultural pluralism can serve the United States is in helping us to better understand all peoples in the small world in which we live and whose future and ours are so tightly intertwined, and we might even think of learning other languages beside English. Our economic productivity will depend heavily on the level of sophistication of the technical skills of our minority groups. The important point is that the dominant culture needs to learn to see everyone in the United States as equally worthy Americans. We have a way to go on this.

If the concept of cultural pluralism could become widely accepted and appreciated, then a next step would automatically be

the development of a national policy to provide necessary, relevant, and accessible educational opportunities to unserved minority adults to bring them to the point where they are in a position to make educational decisions based on equity. The truth is that multiculturalism has arrived whether or not it is recognized and accepted by all. It is here and growing and the only question that remains is how we deal with it. If we are wise, we will deal with it actively, proactively and positively in order to avoid the cultural and ethnic clashes we are witnessing in many countries today, in our own country as well. If we feel that we are enjoying some minimal harmony in our country, we should heed the words of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall who warns that racism lies just below the surface.

The third challenge to be faced after accepting the idea of cultural pluralism and developing a national educational policy to provide equity for minority adults who need educational opportunity, is the question of financing in a time of economic crisis. This is a problem, to be sure, but perhaps not such a problem as it appears at first thought. As I have said, there are hundreds of small and even larger efforts being made in this direction across our country, mostly operating in isolation from each other. If we had an articulated and explicit national policy, this would put a floor under all these programs and encourage adult educators to extend themselves in this direction.

It would encourage adult education graduate programs to include courses for working with adults in minority groups. There are not many such courses now. However, one interesting

trend is occurring in colleges and universities at this time, though not necessarily in adult education programs, and that is the so-called "internationalization of the curriculum." This means that, in so far as possible, the study of all subjects should include a wider perspective than simply the traditional focus accepted by academe in the United States, or even in the Western tradition. The other side of the coin of internationalizing the curriculum is putting a multicultural focus on it. Actually, it is impossible to do one without the other. Persons from virtually every culture in the world are living in the United States today.

As far as financing is concerned, we only <u>think</u> we have to have additional funding to carry out such a project. If this is the expected task of the teacher or professor, then they will have to learn to do it. It would be nice to have funds for training sessions and sabbaticals, and international travel, but much can be done by the willing professional even without these. It takes creativity, ingenuity and the belief that it is important. A comprehensive national policy would undergird all this. I am pleased to say that right now, and with no extra funding, the Adult Education Department of the University of Southern Maine is setting up a sort of international/multicultural clearinghouse with my volunteer services and with the help of one work-study student. There are countless numbers of informed persons who would volunteer to help in such a project, if we only cared to reach out to them.

The last challenge I will suggest is that our adult

education researchers and writers bend their efforts in this direction. In working on a book I recently published, Adult Education in a Multicultural Society, (London: Routledge, 1990) I found very little literature on adult education for multicultural situations. There is almost none which speaks to the philosophical foundations for such work. This does not mean that nothing has been written. It means that while good programs may include work with ethnic minorities, this work has been incidental to a larger program. That is fine as far as it goes. However, the literature has endless entries on multiculturalism for grades kindergarten through twelve. The point is if we do not think specifically about the meaning of cultural pluralism, we may not have a good understanding of the implications, and may be working against the best interests of this concept unwittingly. For instance, we are creating new voters. We will be training new cadres for jobs. How do we want them to vote? Which jobs do we want them to take? Whom do we want in the competition for the best places in university? If we have personal biases in these directions, we might need to think through some of these things.

The ideas I have been expressing suggest that I believe there is some bit of urgency in dealing with cultural pluralism. Let me share a few statistics with you and you may agree that it is urgent.

By the year 2000, just nine years from now, it is projected that one-third of the school children in the United States will be comprised of ethnic minorities. Already, in 25 of our largest cities more than half of the pupils in the public schools

come from minority groups. Already, the Asian Pacific population in California is eclipsing the Black population and becoming second, as a minority group, to the Latino population group. Further by the year 2000, one-third of the United States labor force will be made up of minority persons, and early in the next century one-third of the entire population will be composed of ethnic minorities who will have much power in determining the future of this country.

We can no longer afford to think of our ethnic minorities as peripheral to our national life and purpose. They are close to the heart of American democracy and we should be thankful for the enrichment they bring. Adult educators have a large role to play and they need to be at it now.